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Rochester Institute of Technology

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of  
the College of Imaging Arts and Sciences,  
in Candidacy for the Degree of  
Master of Fine Arts

**CREATURES AND ENVIRONMENTS**  
**BY DANIEL PORTER STEVENS**  
**MARCH 19, 2013**

School for American Crafts  
Metalcrafts & Jewelry Design

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March 19, 2013

DANIEL PORTER STEVENS  
CREATURES AND ENVIRONMENTS



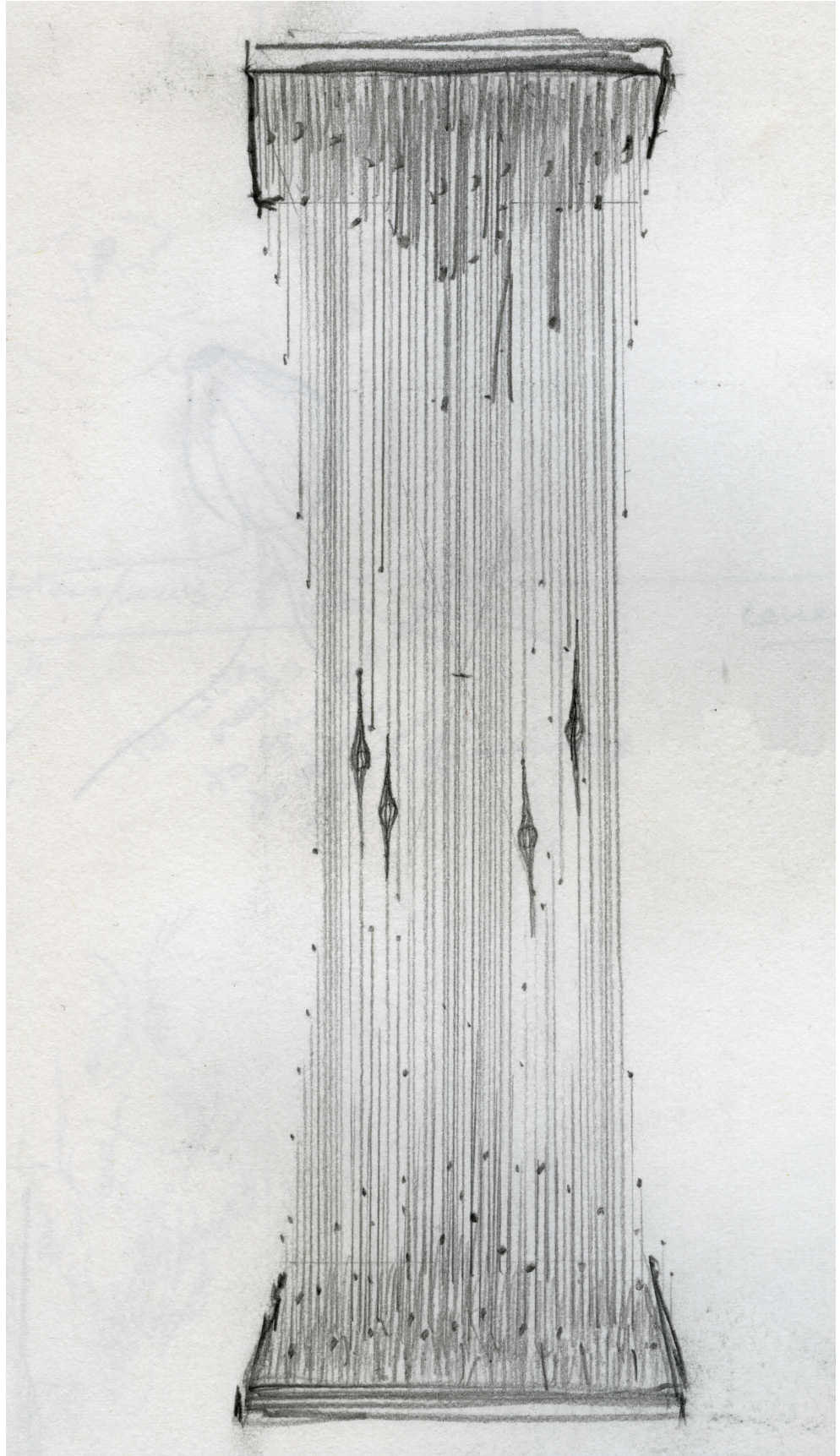


## ABSTRACT

I am interested in how things are formed or made both by natural events and by man. The history and story of the environment we inhabit greatly influences my work. I reorganize materials in ways that twist how they may actually develop left to nature. Nature does some very strange and difficult to explain things and I am looking to make the viewer question the boundaries between nature and manmade. My jewelry is similar to a collected specimen, seemingly distant from where it originated but still bearing the evidence of its origin.

In this body of work I hope to express my desire to understand the history of the materials that make up my work. When I say the history, it is not the factual origin or processes used to obtain these materials but the fictitious story that I have told to myself. Also, in parallel, I want to explore and try to understand my personal intuition and the need to shape these materials.

SCLEROTIUM  
ORIGINAL  
SKETCH



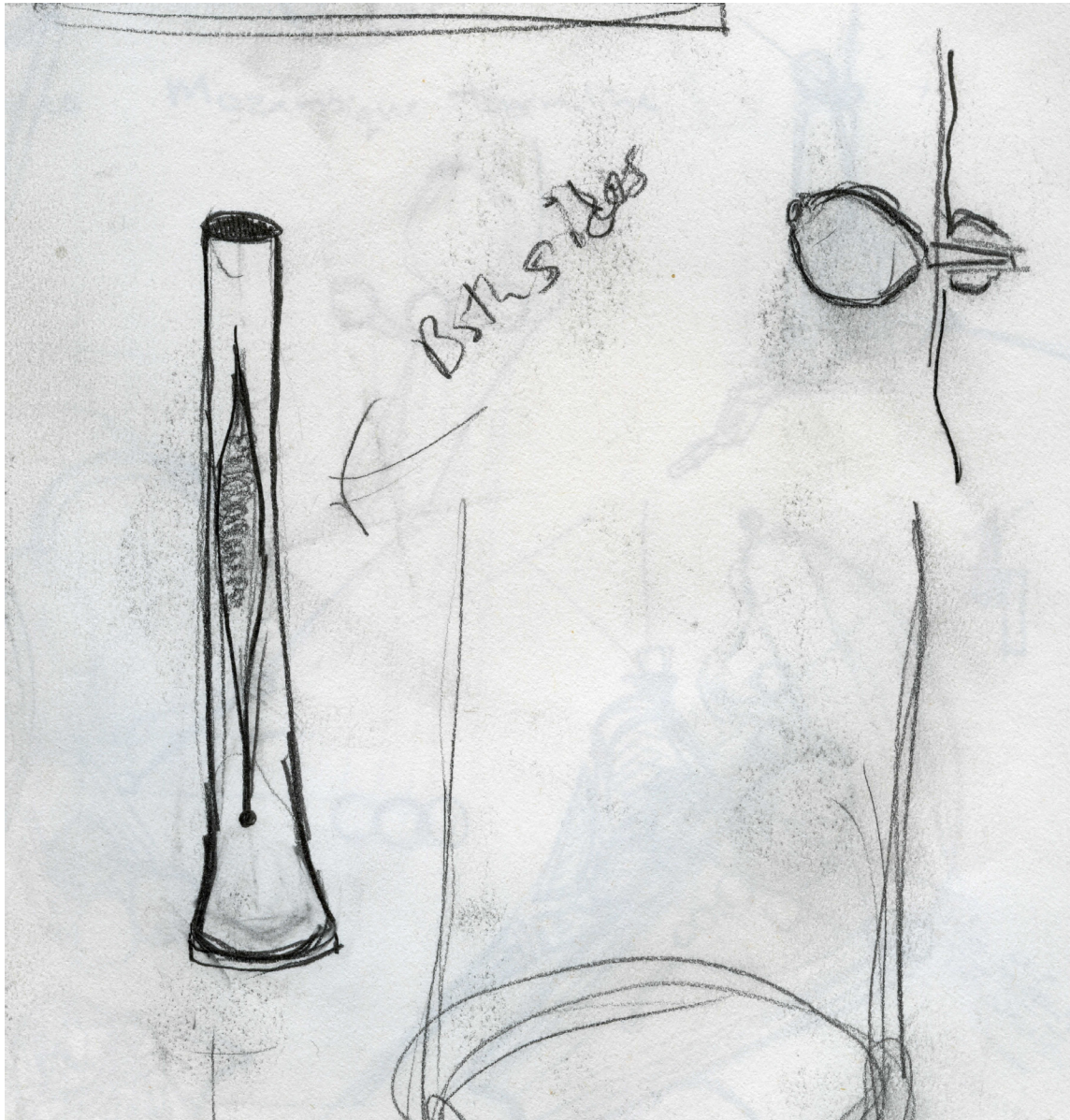
It is not easy to explain why artists make the things we make. Sometimes the reasons for making are there before you start and other times you have to fight with the work to reveal them.

## HISTORY

My thesis investigation began long before I arrived at The School for American Craft. In order to discuss my thesis investigation, I need to explain how I arrived at this way of working. I grew up in a small rural town in the foothills of the Catskills. As a young boy, I spent much of my time outside in the 500-acre forest behind my parent's house digging in an old dumpsite or making forts and small imaginary worlds. Making was something I did my whole life, and as I grew, the little worlds were forgotten as I developed my skill as a refined craftsman of large-scale sculpture. Forgotten until I enrolled in a class called shelters and structures, with Professor Donna Deniss, while earning my BFA at Purchase College. In her class I was encouraged to explore making fanciful and experimental micro spaces. This was a turning point in how I thought about my work and the relationship of large-scale sculpture to microenvironments, like the fanciful creations of my childhood. These small worlds that I was inventing and arranging in cracks and corners in the studio conveyed a sense of time and history that my previous works did not. I was making a much more personal connection to my work and felt as if they manifested on their own, instead of being created by my hand.

Ten years later, in the village of Scottsville, New York, I started the building blocks of my thesis body of work and remembered again the environments from my past. As before, I worked with my surroundings to try to convey the experience of the passage of time using materials specific to a place. Time plays a large part in my exploration of materials, both the manipulation by time and nature demonstrated in the rocks and weathered found objects I incorporate in my sculpture, and the manipulation by myself, shown in the refined work in steel, gold, silver, and enamel. Without the passage of time my work would not share the surface textures and marks needed to convey the sense of age I endeavor to create in my work.





FAR LESS DISTANT  
ORIGINAL SKETCH

## THE PROCESS OF MARKS

Much like David Nash wrote in his eponymous book on his interest in “Going (how an object came into being), Place (how it exists in space), and Change (how it progresses),” I am interested in marks left by an object’s experiences. In his book, Nash documents the creation, movement, settling, and destruction of a large wooden bolder as it travels downstream over the course of many years. Just as Nash’s art takes years to complete, the creation of my raw materials, the boulders, gems, and weathered metal, started years before I lay a hand on the objects. Many of the textures I am looking for in materials come from decades of weathering and exposure to the elements. In many cases after I start working with a material I find it much more truthful to leave any marks made by my hand. In this way I supply a visual history of my alteration of these objects. In this body of work, I chose to focus on stone and metal primarily because of their longevity and ability to share histories through the marks and textures on their surfaces.

There is important history to be gleaned from a rock. The edge of the rock, the surface and the marks, can tell the viewer the story of what it has gone through and where it has come from, be it glacier, field, stream, or quarry. It is a special opportunity for me, the artist, to alter its surface. There is no going back with a stone once I have begun to alter the surface, to make my mark. Once it is done I embrace each mark and call none of them wrong.

Though metal does not share the longevity of stone, I approached it in a similar manner. While I could have melted, acid etched, and reformed it over and over to achieve a desired appearance, I learn more from materials when I work with an object’s own history, incorporating and revealing the evolved surface textures instead of wiping them away and completely reshaping. The documentation of my marks and those that came before me are layered and left evident for the viewer.





EMERGE  
STONE, COPPER,  
SILVER, AND 1/4 CT.  
DIAMOND

## PROCESS AND WORKS

Throughout the making of this series, a parallel developed between my process and the resulting sculptures. As I worked, I flowed from one piece to the next, each evolving from the one before. For the development of this series, I relied on the inherent characteristics of the material, the history of the material, and its naturally made marks to influence the works as they developed. I nurtured my own patience to receive information from the divergent paths I explored during the process.

The first few months of my thesis consisted of experiments with materials unearthed from the yard of my 1850s house in the Village of Scottsville, New York, including rocks and various rusted metals from such discarded refuse as pipes and a wheelbarrow. I knew I wanted to show an evolution of creatures and planned to do this in the form of individual environments incorporating this mixture of found materials combined with some added metals and precious materials of the jeweler's trade. I experimented with a small series of work playing with surfaces that were more tactile than visual, comprised of 14-gauge iron bailing wire, rocks, silver and copper, perforated steel sheet, and old salvaged steel pipes. The body of work was presented to my department for feedback and was met with helpful criticism and concerns that I may not have been open to the direction in which the work was headed. I was holding onto the original planned concept of sculpture and jewelry too firmly, but the experiments yielded some strong opportunities.

I knew the beginning of the series had to be simple and clean. I started with attempting to fuse copper to stone. Using a TIG welder in my studio, I carefully laid four-gauge copper wire into the seam of two halves of a rock that I had cut and then put back together with fused copper. This yielded mixed results; depending on the make-up of the rocks it would either explode or create a successful altered rock. For safety, I started cooling the rocks in a metal wheelbarrow with a steel lid to protect myself from explosions caused by stresses on the rocks during



SPAN  
STONE AND COPPER





uneven, abrupt, temperature changes. Only a small percentage of these rocks survived intact. With such high casualties, I had to change my tactics. Instead of completely separating the rocks, I cut a 2-inch groove around the exterior. I also became more careful about choosing rocks that would hold up under stress. I found sandstone to be the most durable for this process. With this combination of cutting a groove and identifying the best type of stone, I was able to move forward with the sculptures, successfully fusing veins of copper that appear to be bisecting each found stone. These veins have a natural appearance to them, but they are false. This was good. While the man-made marks were obvious, they still seemed, in this environment, to be possible. Following the fusion of copper to stones, I started pouring molten silver and copper into voids in rocks, allowing the metal to drip down the sides of the stone and solidify. This was much more dangerous than the previous experiment and had far more casualties, but at times yielded great results. The results were so spectacular that I chose not to alter my process, but instead exercised great caution.

These first experiments yielded the sculpture called *Emerge*. This was comprised of three rocks: one bisected with a copper vein, another with a puddle of silver spilling off of it, and the third a one-foot-tall slender pointed stone standing upright with a point on top with a quarter-carat diamond mounted in it. The goal was to express the starting point of the series by exploring how, in this environment, copper, silver, and gemstone represent marks on stones that evolve over the course of a stone's lifetime. These elements are a part of the history of how the stones came to be.

Next is a composition called *Span*, which was originally meant to act as a timeline to hold these other pieces together and create a direction and flow for the series. I did this because I was concerned that the order of sculptures was confusing for viewers. To address this I made a grouping of rocks stretching just over thirty feet, each one bisected by a copper vein aligned



REACH  
STONE, COPPER,  
SILVER, ENAMEL, AND  
BRICK DUST



to create a single line. These copper veins were created differently from the initial veins of copper wire fused with a TIG welder into the groove in the stone. In *Span* the copper veins were made up of 22-gauge sheet that was cut into 2- to 3-inch lengths, each 2 inches wide, and then folded in half lengthwise. These pieces were then set into the groove in the rock and the top 1/4 inch was folded out with a hammer slightly over the stone in order to hold them in the rock. Then, with a chisel I pushed down into the copper v to open the vein, using the tension against the sides to hold the vein in place before fusing the seams on each rock. When there were enough stones with veins I laid them all out in a long line with each copper vein touching the next and creating linear movement throughout the space.

REACH  
STONE, COPPER,  
SILVER, ENAMEL, AND  
BRICK DUST

*Reach*, which came after the initial experiments and *Emerge*, has the first creatures in the body of work. It consists of one rock split in half with a wide copper vein made up of



sheet much the same as *Span*. Coming off of the copper center are copper paths fused into channels cut in the stone. These extend out from the center and burrow into the stone, with a copper, silver, and enamel vessel creature seeming to emerge from the vein. These vessels appear to be growing out of the

copper vein, then spread out over the gallery space and burrow into it. The copper vessels were the first of their kind in the series and they consist of an enameled copper vessel with





REACH  
STONE, COPPER,  
SILVER, ENAMEL, AND  
BRICK DUST



FORGOTTEN  
STONE AND COPPER

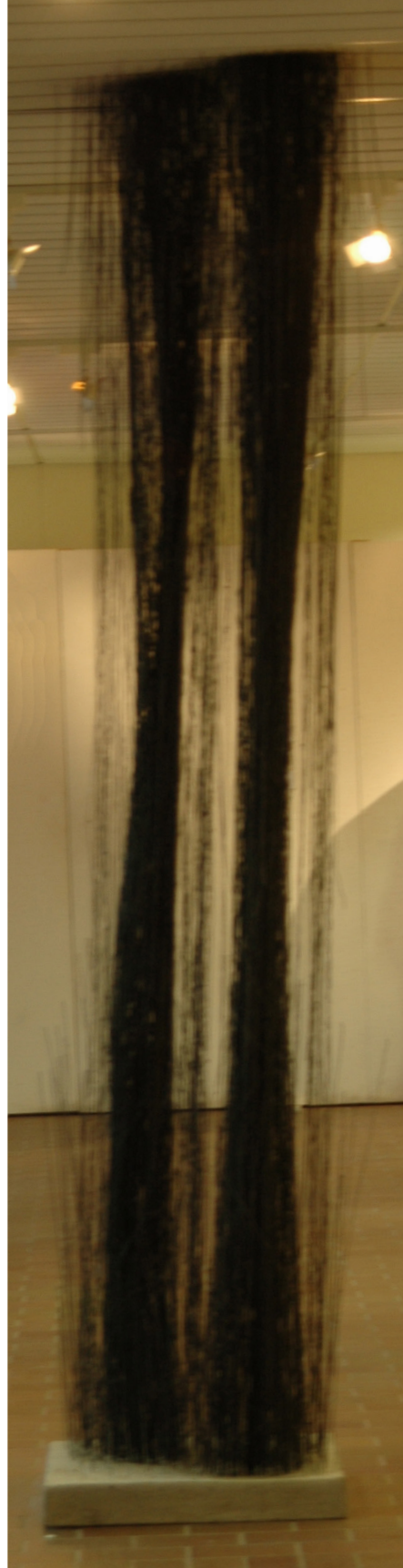


sterling silver tentacles reaching out from the main body. Each vessel is placed into the whole to appear as if they are sprouting from the copper veins. As the vessels travel out from the center stone they fan out onto the gallery floor, some expiring and some burrowing into the brick making piles of dust. It is an important composition in the series because it is the first to include vessel creatures and the first to involve the gallery as part of the installation, showing the whole series is one singular environment made of multiple events.

While I was making this form, I started another work alongside it in which about fifty copper vessels with tentacles made from stainless steel with gold plate carry and manipulate their environment. Much like what happens in nature, with some plants and animals facing extinction, this creation was not as successful as the others. I put that sculpture aside to focus on finishing *Reach*. After returning to the piece I now title *Forgotten*, I realized the importance of the seemingly dead vessels from *Reach* and rearranged the vessels in *Forgotten* so that they are gathered at the base of the rock, as though they are waiting for something and giving tribute to the few on top of

FORGOTTEN  
STONE AND COPPER





SCLEROTIUM  
IRON, STEEL,  
CONCRETE, COPPER,  
AND SILVER



SCLEROTIUM  
IRON, STEEL,  
CONCRETE, COPPER,  
AND SILVER

the stacked rocks. This work is important because it portrayed an initial failure that was revisited and transformed into a part of the environment. The time spent creating, experiencing, and changing the direction of this work contributed to the history and affected the markings on the surface.

As I initially explored the elements of my thesis, I experimented with iron binding wire welded vertically with both ends supported by a sheet of perforated steel. As I added each strand, I staggered them about three-eighths of an inch apart. It formed an interesting visual texture. The model was originally comprised of welding two half-inch steel rods in between two perforated steel plates for the main structure. Then, I stretched fourteen-gauge binding wire between the two plates and welded them in. The form developed a fungus-like structural appearance and is named *Sclerotium*, after the fungus. When presented to my committee, there was a clear issue with scale on the initial version. At four-feet tall it didn't have a strong environmental presence. This was addressed by expanding it to twelve feet tall so that when installed in the space it reached from floor to ceiling creating a strong upward movement as well as an interesting visual environment. Originally, I planned to include vessel-like creatures stretched out between strands holding loose ones together almost like they were building or repairing the structure. In the end, these vessels were a distraction and appeared merely as ornamentation and I removed them from the work. Constructing the piece on such a large scale required planning and locating materials. I had to prepare nearly two miles of binding wire that was stretched and twisted which took almost a month.

While waiting for materials, I addressed some of the earlier works in the series. I then returned to *Sclerotium*, completing the floor to ceiling form by incorporating the structure into an actual ceiling tile from the gallery. When constructing this sculpture, I looked at fungus and its symbiotic relationship





FAR LESS DISTANT  
IRON, STEEL,  
CONCRETE, COPPER,  
AND SILVER

to a forest. Fungus can be destructive in its decomposition and breakdown of organic materials (like the breakdown of the ceiling tile), but at the same time fungus aids the forest by supplying rich nourishment for the soil and promoting growth. This piece was the only one made entirely of man-made items, but in this environment it became a natural form, behaving as a fungus.

The final work in the series, *Far Less Distant*, started with a necklace I began constructing the summer before my thesis project. I first formed the pod of vessels by tapering eight ten-foot steel rods from a quarter inch down to zero. The quarter-inch end of each taper was welded to a central hub. Working with two torches, I heated the tapers until they were red hot and then bent and wove the tapers into the cage-like pod form containing the vessels. At each place where the tapers overlapped, I wrapped the connections with fine silver, then fused it to create a permanent knot. The pod contains more than seventy copper vessels, ten sterling silver vessels, and one gold vessel. Once the pod was complete I realized it did not work for the intended purpose, and I laid it aside to work on other things. I picked up the form again when I was looking for a final sculpture to tie together my thesis ideas by bringing together architectural man-made elements with these seemingly naturally formed creatures. I focused on building an architectural structure around the pod using old steel water pipe salvaged from my backyard. I split the pipe down the center using a torch and in a forge separated the split just enough to fit the pod in, then closed the form back around it. This created the feel that the slit in the pipe is revealing the growth of the pod containing the vessel creatures. I then experimented with a variety of bases, trying steel tripods that visually and conceptually did not work. In the end, I created a very architectural poured cement block with the pipe, welded to a pin, cantilevered off the base.

FAR LESS DISTANT  
IRON, STEEL,  
CONCRETE, COPPER,  
AND SILVER





BEVIER GALLERY VIEW

In the early works, *Emerge*, *Reach*, and *Forgotten*, I manipulated natural found objects with man-made elements that looked like natural occurrences in this environment. In *Sclerotium*, I used man-made materials to create a sculpture that reflected the natural processes of the environment and was moving toward incorporating the whole gallery space as a part of this world by moving into the ceiling tiles. The last piece, *Far Less Distant*, a completely man-made object, was the next step in the evolution, after taking over and decaying the gallery space, a starting point is created for a new series using man-made objects that have been decayed a little by nature. Incorporating those decayed forms, and using them as though they are a natural part of the vessel creatures' environment is the end of one cycle and the start of another.



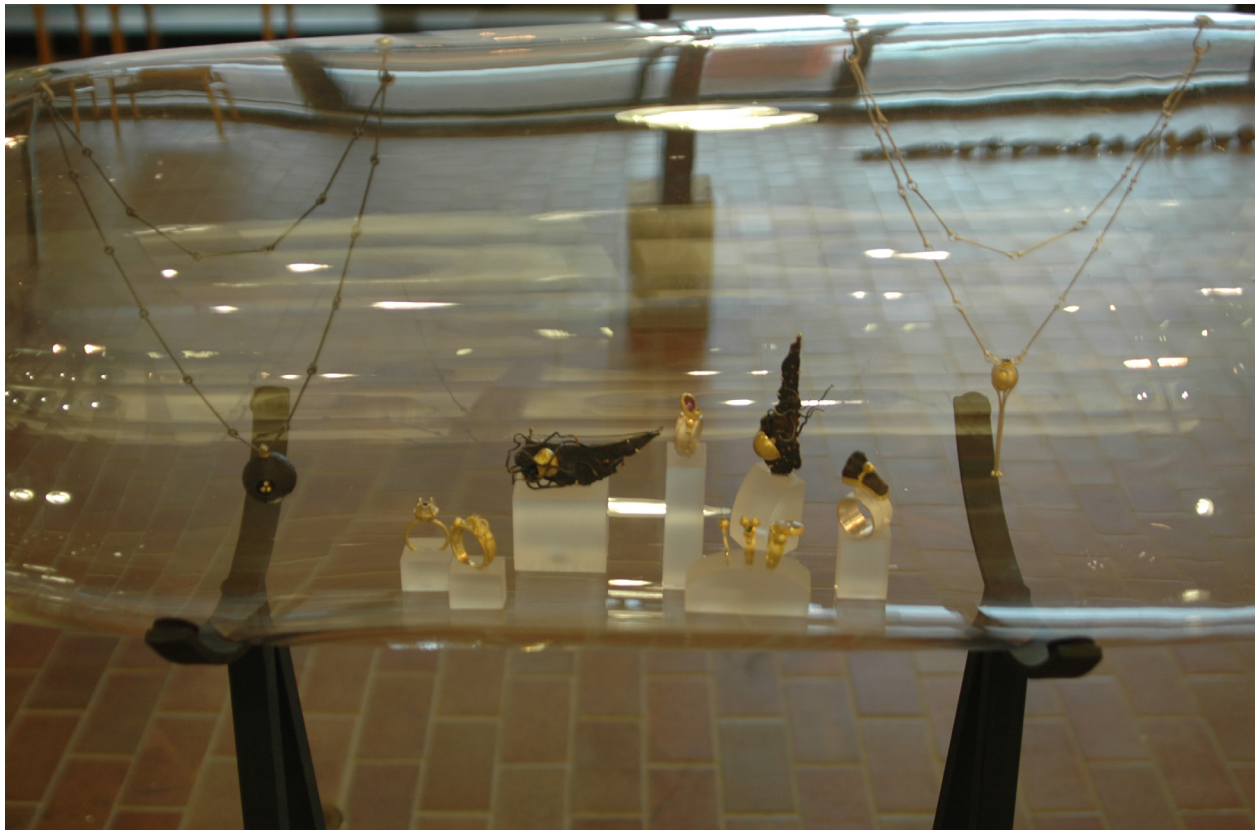


JEWELRY DISPLAY

## JEWELRY

The jewelry is a body of work created in parallel with the environment of the sculptures. I am the connection between the two. Playing off one another, they each allowed me to pause and step away from what I was working on, to have space for reflection. It also gave me the opportunity to experiment on a small scale. I often pulled ideas from the large-scale world to use in the small-scale forms, or the other way around. While I consider the large-scale environments to be the body of my thesis, I decided to show the jewelry as a means of displaying my process, almost like a three-dimensional drawing, though much more refined and able to stand alone. In the end, it provided an entry into my work for some viewers.

### JEWELRY DISPLAY







ABOVE:  
VESSEL BROOCH I  
STEEL, 22K GOLD, 24K  
GOLD, AND STERLING  
SILVER

ABOVE LEFT:  
VESSEL BROOCH II  
STEEL, 22K GOLD, 24K  
GOLD, AND STERLING  
SILVER



WOOD POD NECKLACE  
EBONY WOOD, STERLING  
SILVER, 18K GOLD, 22K  
GOLD, RAW DIAMOND,  
AND THREE 1.3MM  
DIAMONDS



CAGED GOLD VESSEL  
NECKLACE  
PALLADIUM STERLING  
SILVER, 22K GOLD, 18K  
GOLD, AND VINTAGE  
ROSE CUT GARNET





SPLIT STONE RING  
STERLING SILVER, 22K  
GOLD, 18K GOLD, AND  
STONE



LOOSE CAGED VESSEL  
RING  
18K GOLD, PALLADIUM  
STERLING SILVER



TENTACLE VESSEL RING  
18K GOLD, RAW  
DIAMOND, AND A  
1.3MM DIAMOND



VESSEL RINGS  
22K GOLD, 18K GOLD,  
DIAMONDS, AND  
CHROMIUM DIOPSIDE



MOONSTONE VESSEL  
RING  
18K GOLD, 22K GOLD,  
AND MOONSTONE



BARNACLE VESSEL RING  
PALLADIUM STERLING  
SILVER, 22K GOLD, 18K  
GOLD, DIAMONDS, AND  
A ROSE CUT GARNET

## LOOKING BACK AND DOCUMENTATION

There are a few things that now looking back on the show I wish I had the foresight to do. I would have documented the interaction people had with the small vessels on the floor. Watching people interact with them, crouching down to view them, or inadvertently stepping on them or kicking them across the floor, reinforced the intimate experience I originally set out to provoke. Because of that interaction, I have started preparing another series leaning more toward the personal and intimate interaction with the vessels with a means of recording the reactions to them.

DPS